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ABSTRACT

Assessment is discussed as a formal and overt manifestation of quality control. With some experiences in Swedish nursing education taken as the point of departure, assessment is discussed as: (1) a policy implementation and curriculum problem concerning the interpretation and exercise of programs by those in control; (2) a teacher problem reflecting the contradictions between beliefs and assumptions of teachers on the one hand and official duties and obligations on the other; and (3) a structural problem concerning the distribution of power and control. The surface of an educational policy or phenomenon may conceal a strange combination of structural and cultural factors, affecting both the formal and actual patterns of power and control in educational settings. The ways in which teachers act in their roles, deal with educational issues, and solve problems vary considerably depending on structural, social, cultural, and economic conditions. The study of assessment routines and an analysis of the assumptions underlying assessment practice can clarify the power structure in education and the role of education in society. (SLD)

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ASSESSMENT AS A TEACHER DILEMMA

About internal control, uniformity and decentralization in Swedish higher education

by

Berit Askling

Paper presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in San Francisco 1989.

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ABSTRACT

In this paper assessment is regarded as formal and overt manifestation of quality control. With a point of departure taken in some experiences from Swedish nurse education assessment can be discussed as

a) a **policy implementation and curriculum problem,** concerning how educational policy and official goals laid down for particular programmes are interpreted and made concrete by those who exert control.

b) a **teacher problem,** reflecting contradictions between inner beliefs and assumptions of teachers on the one hand and official duties and obligations of these teachers on the other hand.

but also as

c) a **structural problem,** concerning the distribution of power and control.

It is argued that a scrutiny of assesment policy and practice as manifestations of power and control may provide a better understanding of the ultimate functions given to an educational system by society and of the relative autonomy and independency given to the professionals.

This is a paper from the project **"Examination and Evaluation in Professional Higher Education".**

The project aims at describing assessment and evaluation activities in some professional training programmes within the higher educational context in Sweden in order to analyse

a) the actual distribution of power and control in the programmes with special attention paid to how, where, and by whom the controlling activities are accomplished.

b) the relative autonomy of teachers and instructors in these programmes.

An effort is made to integrate the macro- and the micro levels of analyses of quality control and to relate interpersonal considerations to structural conditions.

The project is financed by grant from the National Board of Universities and Colleges.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural comparions often give fruitful starting points for highlighting routines and procedures that are taken for granted and for disclosing myths that have turned into unquestioned truth.

When higher education systems are studied in such surveys, some impressive similarities are noticed in policies, but also in organizational and pedagogical solutions and in reactions from the professionals. (Clark 1987, Cerych and Sabatier 1986). But, despite the apparently existence of an international community of educational ideas and visions, we have also learnt that when it comes to the very core of education - teaching, learning and assessment - the deeply rooted interrelation between one particular educational system and its society becomes obvious. (Trow 1988, Neave 1986,1987). The closer to the working units and curricula such comparions are made, the more one is struck by differences and disparities in organizational solutions and vorking routines. (Becher 1987a, 1987b, Berg and Österberg 1977, Kogan 1987)

This context-boundness is particularly evident, when it comes to the distribution of power and control, that means when governance and evaluation of the educational system are considered. The international uniformity on the level of policy formulation does not correspond to any comparable uniformity when it comes to the level of realization. Although there seems to be international interchanges and "loans" of ideas on educational governance and evaluation, the particular way in which governace is executed and evaluations are accomplished obviously reflect the influence of culture, history and tradition , as well as current conditions within each nation.

Irrespective of policy,the goverance may be either centralistic or decentralized , the control may be either external or internal in character. Whatever model is chosen, the professionals - the functionaires in the system - get more or less of freedom and independency and may be regarded as more or less trusted in creating curriculum and exerting control.This also implies that evaluation models and assessment strategies cannot be "borrowed" from one country to another in any way.

The purpose of this paper is to show that a scrutiny of assessment policy and practice can broaden our understanding of power and control in one particular educational system and also of the position and status of professionals in this system.

ABOUT ASSESSMENT POLICY

Across the years, assessment has been discussed from a variety of points of departure. Research on assessment has up to now usually followed the psychometric tradition and been of the technical kind, investigating the efficiency of tests of diagnostics and as predictors of future success. However, until recently, relatively little research has been carried out on the social, psychological and educational effects of assessment (Nuttall 1986).

Discussions about assessment practice were originally dominated by psychometric considerations. Accurate comparative measurements of student achievement were developed and used for selection, for prediction and for accountability. During the last decade reactions against such an approach have occationally been strong and the shortcomings and negative effects of traditional assessment routines on teaching and learning have been pointed out.

In the middle of the 1950s pure psychometrical discussions about the construction of assessment items were replaced by elaborations of taxonomies with the purpose of highlighting the correspondance between educational objectives and criteria for assessing outcomes. The rationalistic approach was still predominant, but attention was directed towards a classification of items with regard to content and knowledge structure. A well-known and also critizised attempt from that time is the taxonomy elaborated by Bloom et al. (1956).
Bloom's taxonomy offered a conceptual tool for a new kind of critical scrutinies. By the introduction of taxonomies, assessment was turned into a curriculum problem. From such points of departure, assessment has given rise to much criticism for steering the curriculum away from the educational objectives and towards a preparation for the assessment itself.

Assessment has also been discussed as an obligation for teachers inconsistent with and sometimes even almost destroying a supportive and curative approach to the teaching task. A few have suggested a more "educationalist" or "student-centred" approach, influenced by the philosophy and practices of progressive, child-centered educational policy.

Thus, assessment apparently includes tensions and contradictions and gives rise to reactions, which may teach us something of the very nature of our educational system and its context and conditions. From being a technical question of how to accomplish

examinations, assessment nowardays brings to the fore questions about **what** kinds of student performance is important as indications of the expected standard , **how** educational policy is transmitted into action and **who** exerts control of whom and of what. **Assessment as a manifestation of control raises politically value - loaded questions about the integrity of the individual, the function of the educational system and the sovereignity of the State.**

SOME CURRENT TRENDS

Therefore, in these days, other perspectives have come into the forefront: A review of the literature indicates that due to the heterogeneity of aims, strategies and methods assessment has been accomplished in a variety of ways and exerted as either external or internal, central or local and be focused on educational process or product.(Askling 1988).

However, assessment may also be accomplished for a variety of reasons. The current trend in many countries towards more examinations and assessments (which was discussed in Askling 1988), may be regarded as more or less concealed and unspoken efforts to introduce a more centralistic governance and to increase control of the educational system. This tendency is particularly evident in England today. (See for example Broadfoot 1986a,1986b,1987, 1988a,1988b)

Broadfoot discusses the significance of contemporary contradictions in educational assessment policies in England and Wales. As a point of departure for her discussion she identifies four main functions which assessment fulfils.

1) It enables particular definitions of competency to be applied.
2) It largely delimits the content of curriculum
3) Through the concept of competition it provides for the differential outcomes and rewards of education which are in turn translated into the finely differentiated occupational hierarchy of a modern industrial society.
4) It provides a vehicle for control - control of individual aspirations and frustrations through the legitimation of apparently objective educational judgements and control of the message producing system itself through the broader control functions embodied in procedures for teacher institutional assessment and accountability (Broadfoot 1988 a, page 1).

Broadfoot suggests that given this powerful role of educational assessment, a study of the causes and effects of policy changes in this domain may help to provide a better understanding of some of the fundamental changes confronting post-industrial societies and the ways such societies are seeking to respond to them through their educational systems.She suggests that a study of assessment policy and practice can reveal a fundamental contradiction between its use as an instrument of social regulation and control and its potential to do just the opposite by equipping learners with the power to reflect upon and challenge prevailing power relations.
By comparing experiences in England with contemporary events in France and West-Germany, Broadfoot concludes that the control of the nature and content of education involves a complex interaction of factors which combine together to influence teachers' professional ideology. The ciritical issue is one of legitimacy, that is to say, what influences are regarded by teachers themselves as desirable.

Although in her discussion Broadfoot focused upon assessment in compulsory school, and with the current situation in England as a point of departure, her analysis has relevance for an interpretation of the role of assessment in other educational settings as well.She distinguishes two distinct currents in educational assessment policy. One is born essentially of the dominant new right political and emphasises the need to strenghten competition between pupils and institutions. The other is an heir to the liberal era of the sixties and emphasises a more holistic student-centred approach to assessment in which the focus on skills and qualities challenges the more traditional assessment concern with knowledge and understanding within subjects.
Her conclusion is is that teachers should be aware of the two contemporary assessment paradigms - the one objective and system-centered, the other more subjective and learner-centered - and critically analyse what is hidden behind the sometimes too purple prose about assessment.

In the U.S a similar discussion is going on, but more influenced by a well-established tradition of using standardized tests as indicators of the effectiveness of the teachers, the programmes and the school systems, rather that of the quality of the student outcomes. (Resnick and Resnick 1985, Schwab 1989). In official talk - but not necessarily in ordinary talk - educational outcomes in the U.S. are most often equated with student achievement as measured by standardized test. By the "Minimum competency test" the ability of the educational system to produce minimally educated citizens is tested, by the NAEP testing inter-state comparions are made possible etc.(Haertel 1988).

Alkin gives an explanation to the concern about quality in terms of effectiveness and the demands for accountability by referring to the historical delegation of responsibility for education in the United States.(Alkin 1988). In a strong decentralized system, the responsiblity for education has been further delegated to state governments and to local school districs. In many parts of the world, according to the review made by Alkin, there is a long tradition of giving national examinations. Such examinations are used either to determine school leaving, the right to pass to another educational level or as a basis for selection to higher education.(Rhoades 1989).

Stake and associates have reviewed recent research literature on testing with the purpose of getting a platform for studying the impact of standardized testing on diverse components of the educational system (Stake et al 1987). The effects - intended or unintended - of standardized testing on the curriculum, the main purpose of the Stake investigation, were however according to Stake et al difficult to document. Research findings have illustrated that the effects have not been solely registered as either positive or negative.

Testing is highly associated with the aim of maintaining achievement standards, and very often considered to be part of programs for reform and accountability in educational systems. With references to among others Resnick and Resnick (1985) and Madaus (1985), Stake et al also find that tests are more directed towards monitoring programs and schools than to give feedback to the individual students.

Tests function as"warning systems" and falling test scores seem to stimulate national debates about education more than any other single factor. There is a perceived tendency among the public to consider test results as the most accurate information for making educational judgements. Tests are powerful instruments in the accountability movements and can thus be regarded as an increase in state regulation and a decrease of professional responsibility. They can be used as administrative mechanisms to implement policy and such use of tests reflects the increased dissatisfaction with policies aimed at improving educational inputs rather than outcomes.

As teachers, parents, and students see standardized tests as defining the curriculum, a cycle may develop. Tests may narrow the curriculum by making some goals of instruction more explicit than others and by influencing the publishers of textbooks. However, tests alone may not have caused the curriculum to narrow:The narrowing might be a consequence of the importance ascribed by society to test scores and of an emphasis on basic skills.

Today, and clearly articulated by Madaus (1985), more attention is paid to the power aspects of assessment in the U.S. as the assessment results have tomed the light on the professionals in school and made clear their low status. From the point of view of the politicians, tests are used in order to improve education. But from the point of view of the teachers, the test results have been experienced as measurements of school efficiency and as weapons for finding scapegoats for the insufficiencies in student outcomes.

So, despite different societal and eductional contexts, there seems to be an increased concern about assessment in many countries, and an increased awareness of its contradictory functions and inconsistent effects.

ASSESSMENT AS A TEACHER DILEMMA -an illustration.

Since so much in the training programmes are based on the assumption that students ought to learn to take the responsibility for the acquisition of knowledge, some of the students may 'slip through'. It is difficult to define and to establish the proper level of demands in a programme, where the students themselves are asked and supported to take their own initiatives.

In these words a nurse teacher expressed her feelings of insufficiency and worries when asked in a questionnaire to rate whether she considered the achievement demands in a nurse training programme, compared to the estimated demands of the profession, to be too low, appropriate or too high.This teacher's reaction was collected during an evaluation of a para-medical education reform in Sweden . (Askling 1984,1987a,1987b).

In recent years, professional training programmes, such as nurse education, preschool teacher education and teacher education, has undergone several changes in Sweden due to organizational and curricular reforms.

A higher education reform in 1977 with an extensive **decentralization,** by reduction of state regulations and an increase of local decision-making power, has given the professional training schools a local indepenency in designing programmes and creating curricula.

New policies laid down have changed the goal structure, the approach of the programmes and curriculum, and the content of the lessons. But, contrary to the former reform strategy, the schools now were left with less of the "right answers" when structuring the programmes into courses and lessons.

The new higher education context has forced the teachers to strive away from the "schoolishness" of the former schools and teacher colleges and towards a more "academic" style.

Many of the colleagues of the teacher, quoted in the beginning of this section, also witnessed in notes to the question in this questionnaire about their difficulties when trying to implement the educational policy laid down, to turn programme goals into course objectives, to create a positive climate in the courses, to support self-confidence and -reliance, to establish the relevant level of standard with respect to demands from the professional fields, to adjust to background knowledge of the students and - at the same time -to find the best way of assessing the students' achievements during the programmes and predicting their fitness for the profession. Almost the same kind of reactions were expressed at about the same time by teachers in other training programmes, although they were not collected as systematically as in nurse education (Askling 1987b).

Such teacher reactions could probably have been picked up anywhere in any educational system in any country. They illustrate the variety of demands and duties, with which a teacher has to cope. There is an air of universality in the reactions, which may stress the impression that teacher role and teaching are the same all over the world. But when the reactions are interpreted against their own background and when their own context is taken into consideration, the impression loses a bit of its universality. Current conditions as well as tradition influence assessment practice and the teachers' reactions when accomplishing assessment.

The dilemma, which teachers in nurse educatiuon felt, has also been reported from other parts of the educational system in Sweden. Mägi scrutinized the examination routines in the sector of social and political studies at the university of Umeå during the 70s.(Mägi 1983). She found that the combination of complex societal goals of higher education, no opportunities for the universities themselves to select their students, and influences from so called progressive education and cognitive psychology caused a rejection of traditional models of examination, but without any acceptance of self-evident alternatives. Many teachers witnessed during interviews about their feelings of insufficiency and frustration when Mägi tried to bring their own assessment practise to the fore. They took easily part in general discussions about assessment policy but they hesitated when having to declare how they actually accomplished the assessment of their own students

During the 60s oral examinations were a common procedure at universities and also at seminars and colleges. However, due to the large number of students who were admitted in the end of the 60s, oral examinations were replaced by written ones.But when the taxonomies were introduced these written exams were critizied for measuring on a too low level of understanding compared to what was expressed in goal documents. A similar development towards a more "soft" assessment policy also took place in cumpolsory and upper secondary school.(Henricson 1987, Wedman 1983). During the 70s, students reacted against the shortcomings and the negative effects of all kinds of tests, and many teachers joined them in their criticism. According to the main argument, tests and examinations were inconsistent with the general goals laid down for the Swedish educational system . Nation-wide tests, constructed by the National Board of Education with the purpose of giving teachers a help to compare their students to a national standard, were also critizied. As a result of the debate standardized and nation-wide tests and formalized examination activities were reduced or almost abolished on all levels in the educational system as time went on.

In assessing students, teachers in nurse education - and in other professional training programmes - have to take the last step in a policy implementation process. By choosing criteria for passing teachers declare what they consider as important preparation for the profession. Assessment is a part of the curriculum process and obviously accomplished in harmony with educational policy.

When the note from the teacher, quoted in the beginning of this section, is interpreted within its own context and analysed against the background of the particular conditions for teaching in this programme, her note can however also be regarded as an expression of worries about her responsibility for quality control of student achievement and fitness for the prospective job.The "soft" assessment policy, adopted by students and teachers and also accepted by the authorities is still perceived as the only one congruent with the educational policy laid down.The para-medical education reform forced the teachers to change the curriculum which obviously brought about a loss of their own ingrained criteria of what works and what to demand from the students. The higher education reform encouraged the teachers to adjust to a more academic way of teaching by using project study methods etc. But despite these changes, the teachers are supposed to accomplish assessment as usual, which - in Sweden - means that they have the responsibility for estimating not only the achievements gained during the programme but also fitness for the profession.

The teachers have a full responsibility for control and very little of external help in this task, as there are no standard tests, no final examination, no probability employment. For appointment as a nurse or a teacher, the certificate from the training schools (and , in the case of nurses, with State registration automatically received when the student has got the certificate) are the only formal requirements. And this certificate is totally based on assessments made by the teachers themselves. As there are no graded marks in higher education, all certificates are identical and have the same qualification value. Besides, there is no probationary employment: Therefore,the certificate - actually the teachers' assessments - has the status of "entrance ticket" to a full appointment as a nurse or a teacher. There is no further testing for renewing the certificate. Unless no serious mistakes are made, the certification has a lifelong validity. (This is more fully described in Askling 1988.)

The question in the questionnaire about level of standard gave rise to many comments, which all indicated that the teachers found themselves faces with a dilemma: The teachers have to promote good educational quality - but quality can be defined in many ways depending on who is defining it and what goals are given priority to - and they have also the full responsibility for controlling that quality is attained. Obviously, the teachers in nurse education perceived that they have a central role to play in both cases -but that the two tasks were partly incompatible.

The examination of assessment routines in Swedish nurse education shows that the control of students' achievement and fitness for the profession is teacher-based and thus internal in character, but anyhow considered to hold a nation-wide validity. Indeed, this gives a strong position for the teachers , but the teachers themselves seem to feel more frustration than satisfaction when facing their duties and responsibilities.

The teacher have, as "functionaires" in the education system, to act as the ultimate controllers and legitimaters of prospective professionals.This is a challenge but also a dilemma.The teachers have a great autonomy but also a heavy responsibility.

A DECENTRALIZED AND INTERNAL QUALITY CONTROL

The works by Durkheim and Foucauld, among others, have learnt us that in order to understand what are the powerful structures in education and what is the meaning of the every-day phenomena that we have around us , the "institutions" must be examined in their historical and societal context. (Popkewitz 1988a,1988b,1988c). Within a society

and a culture a powerful socialisation of concepts and assumptions of social and pedagogical phenomena take place.(Lundgren 1983). This socialisation determines our thinking and perception of the world around ut. Assumptions, suggestions and beliefs that once upon a time were taken under consideration and used as arguments for a particular action, may in the course of the years be forgotten as dynamic and value-loaded ideas. The actions are institutionalized and get an air of self-evidence. Broadfoot (1988) and Hoskin(1979) have from the same theoretical frame of reference analysed the underlying assumptions of the English assessment and examination systems.

The notion of decentralization seems to command a great deal of attention in countries that have a central structure of governance, in spite of considerable difficulties in agreeing on what exactly it means in practice.(Weiler 1988). The redistribution of power, which is a central notion of decentralization, seems incompatible with the interests of the modern state in maintaining effective control and in compensating for a loss of legitimacy.

Despite the extensive decentralization of decision-making power in the Swedish higher education and the outspoken efforts of market-orientation, the notion of uniformity and the assumption of an in-built State measurement rode with a capacity of guaranteeing a nation-valid equality of worth of final marks without any formalized external control seem to be intact. This incompatibility cannot be understood unless we take the former Swedish reform strategy and the former teacher task into consideration.

Educational reforms were proposed and initiated by the Government and the decisions were taken by the Parliament, sometimes after long and intense preparatory work and debates. The political character of the reforms was thus obvious. However,once accepted by the Parliament the reforms were passed over to the National Board of Universities and Colleges or the National Board of Education for further "treatment" before they were implemented. The Boards elaborated and laid down general study plans and regulations about the relation between subjects, theoretical and practical courses etc.

An educational reform may, in the very moment it is adopted by the Parliament, appear to be clear, rational and commonly accepted. Official aims are often expressed in "harmonious" words. Administrative changes - the means to achieve the derised ends - may also appear to be rational consequences of the accepted goals.The rationalistic planning procedure in Sweden (labelled in these words by Neave and Jenkinson 1983) was a predominat feature of the 50s and 60s when educational reforms were regarded

as tools for "social engineering". The educational bureaucracy got a strong position during the implementations of these reforms and as a consequence, the ideological values of the reforms were made invisible. Reforms were treated mainly as administrative and technical issues and once taken by the Parliament their political value and the interplay with society and culture were concealed. (Lundgren 1983).

The Swedish universities have traditionella been governed by central authorities. Nevertheless, their professional autonomy has been rather extensive. Upper-secondary education and some post-secondary vocational training programmes , on the other hand, were regulated by central authorities even pedagogically. There were at least two reasons for this firm and detailed prescription and regulation of the training programmes: 1) These training programmes have over time been adjusted to current demands in the professional fields but were also considered important and powerful instruments for implementing new policies and attitudes in the public sector. They have been used as tools for "social engineering".In order to use them effectively, their policy-oriented goals were operationalized by detailed prescribed curricula. This firm regulation was - up to the 70s - regarded as the most effective way of implementing changes.
2) The leaving marks from these training programmes have a nation- wide validity . A uniformity of curricula was formerly considered as a guarantee for a corresponding uniformity of outcome standards.

The positivistic, rationalistic reform stragety was a dominating feature in the Swedish public sector in the 50s, linked to the concept of centralism. The central regulations framed the space of action for teachers with regard to policy and curriculum ,but gave them within this space of action a rather extensive autonomy in setting the standards in accordance with a presumed nation valid norm. The uniformity in curriculum was made concrete by a variety of central rules and regulations. A corresponding uniformity of outcomes was assumed but not controlled. The teachers themselves got the responsibility for a uniformity in standard.

When the idea of decentralization was introduced in the Swedish public sector, it was launched with many positive arguments and considered as a constructive alternative to the more or less negatively perceived centralism. At the time that the new decision-making structure was implemented in the higher education system, focus was on the distribution of influence among the actors of the planning process. Decentralization was treated as a question of governance and power and key words in the debate preceeding the reform were: flexibility, effectivity, changing capacity. The controlling functions

were however not very much debated.In fact, the decentralization was regarded as a rationalistic way of meting new demands.

Compared to the situation during the 50s and 60s,when extensive educational reforms were implemented in a centralistic way, the plans and regulations nowardays do not give much governing and framing. On the contrary, local boards,teachers, students and representatives from the professional fields have got more freedom in elaborating courses etc. Anyhow, and this is important to notice, due to tradition the political nature of the reforms is still considered having been "washed off" and the State still stands out as the formal assigner and mandator of the changes and also- by delegation to those who are responsible for the programmes and the curricula - as the controller.

The Swedish higher education reform has caused a mixture of centralism and decentralization, of uniformity and hetherogeneity and of internal and external influences.(Askling 1989). This is most clearly illustrated when the control functions are scrutinied and a scheme may make the reasoning more easy to follow.(Figure 1):

FIGURE 1 about here

Policy and intentions are assumed to be "transmitted" downwards in the organization in several steps. On each level the decisions taken are supposed to reflect the actors' interpretation of the policy, but also to be adjusted to various frames and other preconditions that constrain or determine the space of action. According to the intentions behind the higher education reform this decentralized decision-making will give room for a more flexible planning, a more sensitive adjustment to local conditions and a better climate for innovations. And despite the fact that the steps from intentions to outcomes means a travel through different cultures, societies and individuals holding a variety of assumptions about what is the social relevance of knowledge in the programmes, there is an expectation of a commonly shared frame of reference in interpreting goals and setting the standards. Apparently, the notion of the strong State is still alive and so is the assumption of uniformity and equality of worth within the educational system.

Despite the decentralization and the reduction of State regulation the teachers are trusted. They are assumed to act in a uniform manner as State functionaires: as agents of change in implementing progressive reforms and at the same time as controllers of their own results.

CONCLUSION

Thus, behind the surface of an educational policy or phenomena a very strange combination of structural and cultural factors may be concealed. These factors affect the formal as well as the actual pattern of power and control in the educational settings. Educational issues, curriculum problems and teacher roles may appear as having the same characteristics irrespective of actual context, but the ways in which teachers act in their roles, deal with educational issues and solve curriculum problems vary to a considerable degree depending on structural,social, cultural and economic conditions. This also holds for notions about professionalism.

A scrutiny of assessment routines and an analysis of assumptions underlying assessment practice can make the power structure in education and the role of education in society more clear.

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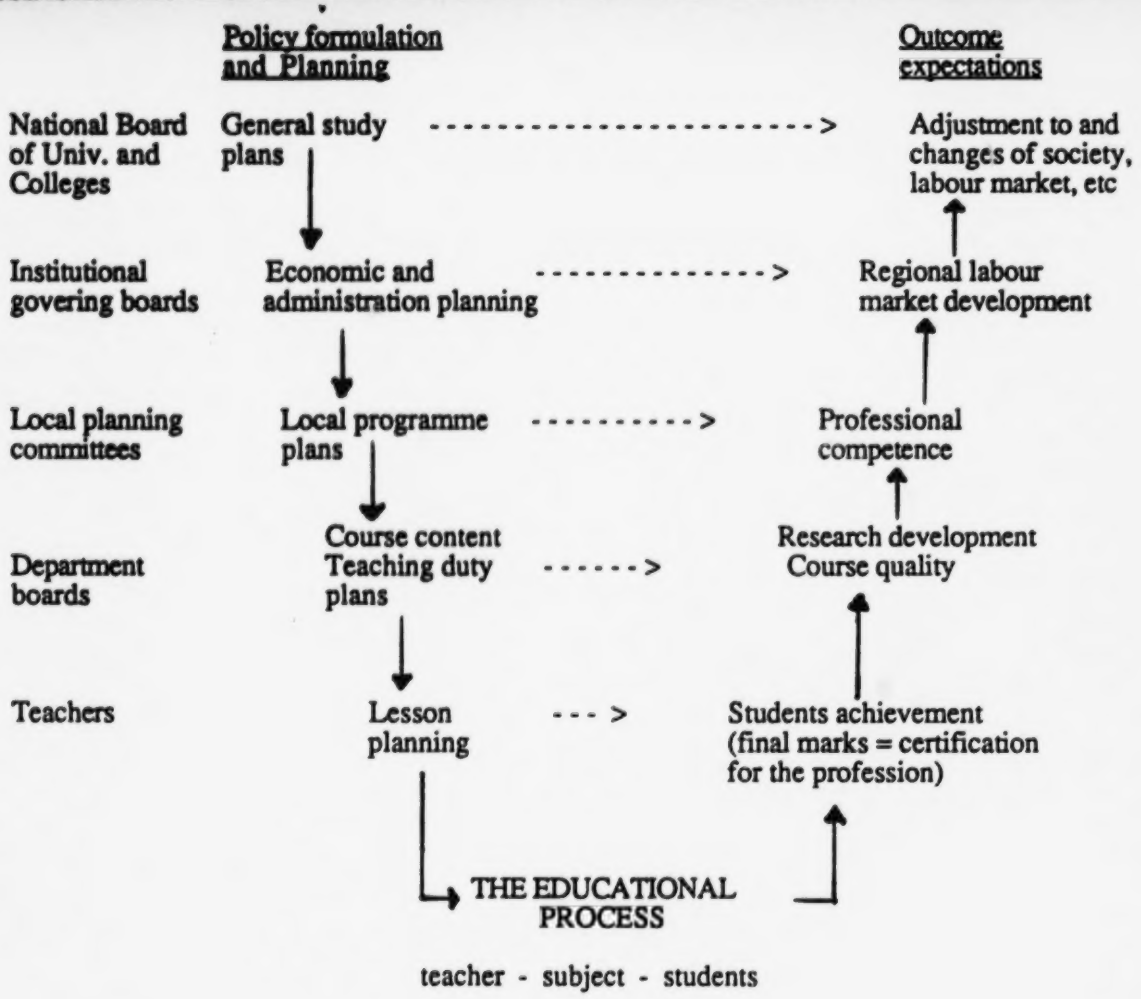

Figure 1. Policy formulation and outcome expectations. Organizational levels of desicion-making power and outcome control in Swedish higher education.